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SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

Behavioral scientists have devoted considerable attention to religious extremism and the psychological factors that contribute to an individual's propensity toward violence. However, relatively little data are available on those who abandon extremism and become proponents of conciliation and peace. Dr. Renee Garfinkel offers a number of tentative conclusions about individuals she has interviewed who have made this transition.

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The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policy positions.

Renee Garfinkel

Personal Transformations

Moving from Violence to Peace

Summary

- Just as people become religious extremists, some of them abandon extremism and embrace peace. For some this change is a spiritual transformation, similar to religious conversion.
- Under certain circumstances stress, crisis, and trauma appear to play an important role in the process of change.
- Geographic relocation may be important for some. Migration involves novelty, insecurity, and instability, conditions that enhance vulnerability and, perhaps, openness to change.
- The transformation experienced by religious extremists involves a reorientation in outlook and direction but does not necessarily imply an alteration in basic personality structure.
- A key factor in the transition is personal relationships. Change often hinges on a relationship with a mentor or friend who supports and affirms peaceful behavior.

Introduction

"The fire of vengeance was kindled in me.... Religion is more powerful than atomic bomb. The passion of religion is more terrible than Katrina, more terrible than a tsunami. But if it is used positively, it can change the world." —Imam Muhammad Nurayn Ashafa, Nigeria

"Going from a place where I hate the Arabs and I hate the government and I hate this and I hated that, you go to a place where you love your neighbor and you love the other, even though it's difficult, but you still try." —Leah Lubin, Israel

"Would Jesus fight the Muslims or preach to them? That was my turning point. Christians were always on defense, we never attacked first. But the issue was when to stop the defense. Knowing when defense becomes offense is a problem." —Pastor James Wuye, Nigeria

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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The United States Institute of Peace is an independent, non-partisan institution established and funded by Congress. Its goals are to help prevent and resolve violent conflicts, promote post-conflict peacebuilding, and increase conflict-management tools, capacity, and intellectual capital worldwide. The Institute does this by empowering others with knowledge, skills, and resources, as well as by its direct involvement in conflict zones around the globe.

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Optimism was in short supply around the world at the beginning of 2007. Suspicion and distrust, violence and extremism took center stage in international news and hijacked the agenda. Much of the conflict was expressed in the language of religion.

Sectarian violence between Sunni and Shia continued without letup in Iraq. Casualties among Iraqis and Americans reached the thousands. The genocide in Sudan went on, with Arabized Muslims killing African Muslims. Iran and North Korea declared their intention to become nuclear powers, and the Iranian president called for the annihilation of Israel. Attacks on Israel by Hezbollah had led to a month-long war and revealed a vast buildup of sophisticated weapons in Lebanon. Added to that were the continuing fallout from the publication of polemical cartoons in Denmark in 2006 and a controversial academic speech by Pope Benedict XVI in Germany. At times it seemed that religion itself might be driving the escalation of violence and extremism.

Despite the ugly power of violent words and actions, a quiet counter-rhythm kept beating. It was made by peaceful men and women motivated and inspired by religion to seek alternative means of connecting with one another across religious divisions.

This report is neither exhaustive nor definitive. Rather, I seek to take a closer look at the phenomenon of transformation through several individual cases. How it is that in societies at war, surrounded by ideologies of violence and experiences of threat, some people nevertheless become seekers of peace, advocates and practitioners of nonviolent conflict resolution?

In his bestselling book, *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell argues that the best way to understand changes within society—from the emergence of fashions to the ebb and flow of crime waves, the rise of teenage smoking, or any of myriad ideas, behaviors, and messages that spread through society—is to learn from what we know of the dynamics of the spread of epidemics. He posits a basic, underlying pattern in the movement of any idea or action through society, regardless of whether it is trivial or deadly.

Gladwell is interested in the forces that lead large numbers of people to know, accept, and follow a trend. But some individuals resist those forces. A minority can think and act against the prevailing winds.

In the psychological and behavioral literature, individuals noted for their ability to withstand negative pressure are called “resilient.” They have experienced very adverse circumstances typically associated with poor psychological and social outcomes. They may be children of mentally ill parents, or they may have grown up in very deprived economic or social conditions, but they turn out to be healthy and productive, despite the odds against them.

Another, similar approach to understanding the spread of social pathology (whether grounded in ideology, theology, economics, biology, or anything else) is to examine individuals who may have been swept up in the harmful trend but did not succumb to it. They recovered from the social pathology and were no longer vulnerable to it. These individuals are not typical. On the contrary, the fact that they are exceptional is precisely why they are of interest. Our project is to understand how they emerged from the world of violence. Representing an extreme of resilience, they survived the malignant forces of religious extremism and then went on to develop exceptionally powerful alternatives.

Like other trends, today’s trend toward violent religious extremism spreads through social networks. Violence is a primitive form of resolving conflict. It is basic, widespread, and self-evidently effective in imposing one person’s will on another. Violence is attractive. It enhances the superficial appearance of strength and leadership. From teenage gangs to military parades, a show of force—potential or actual violence—impresses followers and onlookers.

Violence sanctioned by religious authorities is particularly easy for some believers to accept. In the context of religiously sanctioned violence, when a believer continues to maintain faith and religious loyalty but changes his or her views and rejects violence, that is a transformation we need to understand. How does it happen? What are some of the factors that influence such a change? And, most important, how can it be encouraged?

I began studying the dynamics of some religious extremists' transformation into proponents of peace by interviewing people living in regions of conflict around the world. Some of them had significant careers as fighters and leaders of militant groups. Some had supported violent political solutions. All are now working for peaceful change.

They are not saints. Their politics and ideologies are not necessarily those of traditional pacifists, nor are they equally positive toward all of their adversaries. They are not equally understanding of all groups they consider "other." But they no longer advocate violence as a means to achieve their goals. Each interviewee has come a long way from his or her former belief system. In an affirmative and nonviolent manner each now engages people he or she once would have fought or shunned. These are spiritual people who continue to be committed to their religious path and feel elevated and inspired by the direction they have taken and for which they have paid a price.

The following accounts of former extremists, interviewed by telephone in late 2006 and early 2007, are intended to stimulate discussion of an oft-neglected theme. Although few in number, they might nevertheless yield hints of commonalities in underlying processes of growth, change, and development.

Personal Journeys of Transformation

Pastor James Movel Wuye, Nigeria: Conversion within the Faith

Pastor James of Kaduna, Nigeria, was a leader in the Christian youth militia in a country fraught with interreligious and interethnic warfare. Militancy came naturally to him: He grew up in a military barracks while his father pursued a career in the armed forces during Nigeria's civil war. In Kaduna there was frequent violence. Christians were marginalized under a Muslim caliphate. Pastor James described Muslims as being "like masters." Muslim militias would attack Christian villages and churches for many kinds of provocations, such as alleged blasphemy. They saw attacks on Christians as a way of "purifying society." Pastor James enrolled in the Christian militia and rose in its ranks. He saw combat. It was clear to him that his acts of violence were defensive: He was working to protect Christian families and villages and his country. He saw many young men die in combat and was severely injured himself. He lost a hand.

A public health problem brought Pastor James in contact with the Muslim leader who would later become his partner in peacebuilding. The problem was the refusal of Muslim mothers to let their children be immunized. A rumor had circulated that immunization was a Western plot aimed at sterilizing children. Recognizing the power of religion, government authorities made an effort to show that childhood immunization was in everyone's best interest by recruiting religious leaders of both faiths to help change attitudes. The officials thought that Christian leaders promoting immunization for their own community might show everyone there was nothing to fear. Pastor James and his Muslim colleague Imam Ashafa (whose own journey follows) met on this project. Their cooperation might have ended there, but for a mutual friend—an important and trusted companion in this faith journey—who urged the two to talk to "increase peace and understanding in Nigeria."

That meeting was not followed by overnight change. Rather, the two worked for several years on programs of dialogue designed to reduce passions in both communities. They cooperated with interfaith groups in Nigeria and around the world. At that stage, Pastor James admitted, he worked with Muslims but remained suspicious.

This theme emerges in many of the interviews: It continues to be emotionally and socially difficult to engage peacefully with the enemy. Suspicion and doubt persist. Fear and aversion are dogged. Resistance to encountering the hated and feared "other" is great. For some who have gone from combatant to proponent of peace, resistance to working with the enemy is always to be reckoned with and is not entirely overcome for a long, long time.

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and a fool, a compromiser.***

But some aspects of basic humanity reach across the divide to the heart. Pastor James experienced one such moment when his mother was sick in the hospital, and his Muslim colleague Ashafa visited her. The compassionate gesture “confused” Pastor James. It breached an emotional barrier and challenged his long-held assumptions.

For Pastor James, resistance came in the form of self-doubt and in objections from his colleagues. He wondered how he could work with unbelievers. “The house of Baal has nothing to do with the house of God,” he thought. Some of his friends saw his work as a betrayal, and he worried that his militant colleagues might even try to kill him.

A memorable moment of change came when he was working with a U.S.-based, Christian missionary organization. At the orientation for his new position as coordinator for western Nigeria, a respected colleague and his wife asserted, “You cannot preach Christianity with hate. It is hard to love the Muslims, but you must try. What would Jesus do, fight the Muslims or preach to them?” Pastor James recalled this moment as a turning point in his life. He could now be resolute in what he understood to be a divine mission. His first choice would be to convert his friend to Christianity, but since that was not possible, it was his mission to create a space where all faiths could flourish. “To live like a Christian is to live in peace with all people.... To be a Christian is to treat people with righteousness,” he said.

Although Pastor James could identify a turning point, his narrative tells of spiritual transformation that was years in the making. Years of working peacefully and productively with Muslim colleagues, both on civic projects and in careful public religious dialogue, preceded the turning point.

The experience also had a dark emotional and spiritual side. Pastor James considered years of his life before his transformation to have been wasted. The lives of many young people were lost; many families were bereaved. He lost his hand and feels his amputated limb was a kind of sacrifice. “I have only one hand left from militancy. Now I would try to defend the church with dialogue.”

Pastor James is passionate about peace, and his passion is infectious: “We are turning people around from hate to dialogue.” He and his partner, Imam Ashafa, have become role models for others.

Imam Muhammad Nurayn Ashafa, Nigeria: Transforming the Terrible Power of Revenge

Imam Ashafa is a devout, religiously observant man who asserts, “I am not a conservative Muslim.” He identifies the conservative, popular expression of Islam with the barbarism of the seventh century, which he calls “our dark ages.” Ashafa defines himself as a “real, traditionalist Muslim, following the principles of Muhammad.... Muhammad forgave his worst enemy, who murdered his own daughter and made him leave Mecca.”

Imam Ashafa works as a motivational speaker to Islamic groups and as a peacemaker with his Christian partner, Pastor James. For his efforts he lost his best friends and was called a hypocrite and a fool, a compromiser. He even had a fatwa issued against him because he insisted that Muslims are permitted to have a dialogue with non-Muslims and live together in peace “as long as they do not kill us.” The fatwa was dismissed when the arbiter of Sharia law agreed that Ashafa had committed no crime and that his work was not anti-Islamic but was in line with Islam’s true spirit.

Imam Ashafa was raised in a religious home. His father was a mufti, and Ashafa grew up in a monolithically Muslim community. As a boy he was not exposed to secular education because Christians ran the schools, and the Muslim community feared Christian efforts to evangelize their children. He was permitted to attend secondary school, however, in Kaduna, where the interactions of the Christian and Muslim communities were characterized by mutual demonization and destruction of places of worship. After joining a movement for the revival of Islamic values, he said, “by an accident of history, I found myself on the side of what today are called Islamists or Islamic fundamentalists.” A leader, he became the general secretary of the Association of Muslim Youth Organizations.

Ashafa described two important incidents in his history of violence. One was a 1992 conflict between the Christian and Muslim communities. Forty-eight hours of reprisals and counter-reprisals left 3,000 people dead and hundreds missing. Describing the devastation he said, "It was a small kindergarten for the Rwandan genocide."

Another powerfully radicalizing experience was the death of his Sufi mentor. Sufis are nonviolent, and his mentor had urged him "to share the seed of love in your heart." When this man was murdered along with two of his own cousins, Ashafa said, "the fire of vengeance was kindled."

There was no dramatic and emotional turning point in his way out of violence. It was a slow, hard-won path. It began with the public health crisis, when the government turned to religious leaders to help quell rumors that immunization caused sterility in children. The rumors led Muslim parents to refuse to immunize their children. Like Pastor James, Imam Ashafa was recruited to help. They met on that occasion. When a mutual friend put their hands together, saying, "I want you two to talk about peace," Ashafa recalled pretending to be polite while his heart was "bleeding revenge. My intention was to discover how to hurt them."

Years of yearning for revenge do not turn around in an instant. Imam Ashafa and Pastor James went forward carefully and warily, taking tiny programmatic steps together and in their own communities. Imam Ashafa described hearing a sermon on forgiveness in a mosque and thinking, "How is it possible to forgive the colonial masters, or those who killed my spiritual mentor?" and crying. He prayed with other people, he tried to forgive and let go of his deep anger. Cognitively he tried to look to the future rather than the past. He also worked on understanding the larger context in which his pain existed: "People are remotely controlled. They are manipulated. They become like robots.... The seeds of genocide were sown by very few elites who control the masses, control their social lives. They demonize others, making them appear less than human until there is nothing holding them back from harming them. They are not killing a person but killing a snake, something that is a source of danger."

A deeply religious man, Imam Ashafa said, "The Quran was my source of healing." To illustrate, he pointed to the Quranic law that permits the family of a murder victim to choose not to execute the murderer, nor even to take "blood money" (compensation), but to let the murderer go and even help him overcome the circumstances that caused him to murder.

Imam Ashafa's transformation from revenge seeking to peacemaking was a hard spiritual task that took place simultaneously on many levels. He carefully built a slowly growing relationship of trust with Pastor James. That relationship was supported by at least one important friend. Spiritually and religiously, he used prayer and the study of texts to come to a new understanding of the deeper values of his religion. He had the will to let go of his anger and found ways to do so, using tools such as introspection and analysis of the large political and social forces that perpetuate hate.

Yasin Malik, Kashmir: A Prison Conversion to Nonviolence

Although he believed and practiced violence under the banner of an Islamic group, Yasin Malik objected to being called a "religious extremist." He identified himself as a secular moderate. His extremism had been nationalistic. As a convert to nonviolence, he includes among his role models Hindus, Christians, and secular leaders. Nevertheless, he said, "I consider Muhammad to have been the father of nonviolence. For thirteen years he suffered persecution and humiliation.... The soul of Islam, its essence, is nonviolent."

As a young man Malik was a leader of the Islamic Student League, committed to armed struggle for Kashmiri independence. His record is one of outright violence, first as victim, then as perpetrator. As commander-in-chief of Islamic forces during the 1990 massacres in Kashmir, he was arrested and given a long sentence in solitary confinement.

This was not his first arrest, nor would it be his last. His story is in part a chronological listing of attacks, arrests and beatings, imprisonment, torture, and brutality. He said he has been jailed more than two hundred times. Still the chairman of the Jammu

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and Kashmir Liberation Front, Malik continues to fear an attack on his life and to speak out for an independent Kashmir.

But during years in solitary confinement he had time to read. He studied the intellectual history of nonviolence and became committed to it. Gandhi and others were not just role models and inspiration; in his isolation they became his companions as well—his mentors. They were his “spiritual support while I learned to suffer.” Most of all, they taught him patience along with hope. Just as they patiently suffered and eventually prevailed, so he and his cause would prevail.

Trauma and loss figure prominently in the spiritual transformation of those who leave violence behind. Malik’s experiences of physical abuse and loss are of mythic proportions. For some people, traumatic pain and loss are also opportunities. When Malik was hospitalized for serious surgery he realized that the two Hindu physicians who were treating him so tenderly knew he was a terrorist. They could have neglected him, or worse. They could have—perhaps even should have—considered him their enemy. Nevertheless they treated him with compassion. Like so many others who have changed their attitudes and actions toward enemies, Malik recalled having been treated with compassion at a time of need as an important step in his journey.

Solitary confinement represents a nearly total loss, and it was in those depths that Malik was able to reflect and relate to men from other times and places who led their people with nonviolence. He became convinced and committed to that way and wanted to create a nonviolent culture for his people.

Demonstrating his deep commitment to nonviolence, Malik declared a unilateral ceasefire at a time when there were 50,000 Kashmiri militants. Now, he reported, only 1,500 armed youths remain active.

Today Malik’s vision extends beyond self-determination for Kashmir. “I want to create a nonviolent culture in the world,” he said. He believes the media, which now play a destructive role by obsessively focusing on violence, could make different choices and help create a space for nonviolence.

Leah Lubin, Israel: A Journey Away from Fear

Leah Lubin is the interviewee who spoke most openly about the importance of fear in religious extremism. Fear is the source of the emotional nourishment of hate. Now Lubin delights in her freedom from irrational fear. That freedom is part of her spiritual transformation.

Lubin is the Jewish coordinator (along with Christian and Muslim coordinators) of the Jerusalem group that is part of the Interfaith Encounter Association, an Israeli organization. Lubin’s group is called Reut Sazaqa, an Arabic name meaning “unconditional friendship.”

A religious, observant Jew, Lubin was attracted by Rabbi Meir Kahane’s early writings, which challenged Jews to live with less complacency and materialism. He preached a more idealistic, dedicated, and religious way of life. And he advocated the use of violence. Kahane said “never again” would Jews be victims. The land of Israel was promised to the Jewish people in the Bible, he believed, and Jews must be prepared to defend themselves and their birthright aggressively.

The Rambo style of Kahane’s small group of followers appealed to Lubin, who was a mother of young babies at the time. She was building a family, and it made sense to her to be building a country and a society based on firm nationalistic and religious values. These all needed vigorous protection from real enemies. Lubin was proud of her Judaism and her Zionism, and Kahane affirmed that pride. Violence was just part of the package.

Like most people, Lubin lived in a community that shared her views. The sameness supported a way of life that was comfortable—until Yitzhak Rabin was murdered.

The assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was an Israeli and a Jewish trauma. In its wake Lubin found she was no longer “comfortable” with her circle of friends. She said, “I just remember, you know, feeling really, really weird for the first time and telling my husband that it just doesn’t feel right.... We were basically focusing on cursing Rabin,

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even though he was dead, and everyone else who doesn't agree with them.... I just didn't feel good about it. On the other hand, I didn't feel ready to get to know the other, either. So I was kind of stuck in limbo."

She tried to continue to be with her friends and social and political community as before, but she no longer fit. Following the violence of Rabin's murder, she "felt weird" during conversations about violence. Both Kahane and Rabin had been murdered. Rabin's murder made her feel ashamed because the murderer was a religious Jew. Along with the emotional discomfort went thoughts: "Even if the Arabs talk about killing us, that doesn't mean it is right for us to do that."

During the time the Palestinian intifada was increasing the violence around her, Lubin came across some newspaper articles about interfaith work, particularly Yehuda Stolov's Interfaith Encounter Association. The idea of people sitting and celebrating holidays together and learning about one another's experiences appealed to her. She thought, "Perhaps this is the path I am looking for."

The interfaith groups are explicitly nonpolitical. "We're not allowed to talk politics, but you know, all informal conversations end up being just that." The Palestinian group members challenged Lubin. "After the initial yelling and screaming ... I understood they had the same misconceptions and fears about us as we had about them."

Lubin's involvement in the interfaith group led to changes in her social world as well. Formerly enveloped in a politically and religiously homogeneous community, she now found "a different kind of community and they were all mixed. They were Orthodox, they were nonaffiliated, and they were atheists."

Some of her old friends were curious about her interfaith activities and asked to be put on the association's mailing list. But social resistance to change is a powerful force, she said. "People are curious. I think they want to know, but what would the neighbors think? I have the same problem with some of our Arab colleagues. A lot of them can't tell their neighbors and friends exactly what they do. It's not an easy thing here."

Lubin sees her transformation in spiritual, not political, terms: "I am not a left-wing activist. I am not against the occupation, against this, against that. I don't want to be against anything. I don't want to hate Arabs. I don't want to hate Jews.... I focus on being positive, and that was the big change. I felt that everything was going to be more positive in my life. That was going to be the change."

She feels enriched by her increased understanding of her neighbors' customs, practices, holidays, and experiences. Although both Israelis and Palestinians suffer in the conflict, she feels the group is an oasis of peace. That peace makes spiritual reverberations within her that make her happy. She used an intimate illustration to describe how she has changed: "It used to be that you saw an Arab and that's it, he's going to kill me or.... I remember walking down the street in Jerusalem with my baby, and this Arab woman came by and started stroking her arm, and I was petrified. 'Oh my gosh, she's going to kill my baby.' I yanked it away from her. She noticed how I just grabbed the baby away.... Now I would strike up a conversation with her."

Lubin believes the best way to promote her approach is to live it. "If people see that I am continuing and happy and I am inviting Palestinians into my home during the holidays ... I'll make an effort to invite some Jewish families, too, who would normally not meet one another." People are often, but not always, receptive. "Just by telling my story people can get to think about it," she said. Lubin's blog about her peace group came to the attention of a woman in Bahrain, who described herself as very militant. She wrote, "You know what, your blog changed my view. I didn't know that there were Israelis who wanted peace." She invited Lubin to write for her Web site, aimed at Middle Eastern youth.

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Souliman Khatib, Palestinian Territories: Evolving toward Nonviolence

"I used to believe only a military solution would work," Souliman Khatib explained. "Now I don't believe in military solutions. Only nonviolence will lead to change."

When he was a young teen, Khatib wanted to be a hero. So he did what the cool guys did and what his culture idealized: He attacked Israelis. He considered himself part of the violent struggle. He was arrested for that violence and spent ten years in prison.

Somewhat defensive about his younger self, Khatib was quick to add, "Our violence was not criminal. It wasn't because we liked violence."

He emerged from prison with an education in history and politics and the desire to have a normal life. The years in prison left their mark, he admitted, but he did not elaborate except to say that he went on to work for the cause "in other ways." He worked with Fatah and other organizations and supported the 1993 Oslo Accords.

Although he spoke warmly about the role of emotion and the importance of personal relationships in bringing people along the road to nonviolence, when he described his own process of change, Khatib confined himself to the intellect. He stressed the role of reason and cognition and talked about embracing nonviolence the way someone might describe recognizing that a sledgehammer was simply the wrong tool for the job. Khatib reported that his growing understanding of politics and the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict brought him to the realization that violence would not succeed.

For the past four years Khatib has advocated nonviolent means of achieving his political goals. He was one of four Palestinians who traveled with Israelis on the "Breaking the Ice" expedition to Antarctica in 2003. The experience gave him his first personal contact with Israelis. He observed, "Palestinians think of Israelis as soldiers, Israelis think of Palestinians as terrorists. Both are human beings. Both have a right to live."

In 2006 he toured the United States with an organization called Combatants for Peace, composed of about 200 former Palestinian militants and former Israeli soldiers who are committed to peaceful dialogue and establishment of two states living side by side in peace. Their literature asserts, "We refuse to be enemies."

The importance of age and stage of development, both psychological and spiritual, can be seen in Khatib's story. As a teenager, he wanted the approval of his peers and tried to live up to what his society admired. He believed he could be somebody by being tough. His political view was limited to us vs. them. He was violent. Now in his fifties, he has a wider and longer view of history and politics. The work he is most proud of is being a conduit of connection between the two peoples. He said, "I don't try to effect change directly. I believe I've gotten people to accept one another. Some people were difficult to bring to a joint (Israeli-Palestinian) project, especially the youth and the students.... It is not just about ideology, it is about connection with a person. I tell people my story. I use my emotion and experience, my heart. I talk about things I am close to, and I become emotional when I talk. The contact between mind and heart is what changes people."

Assad Shaftary, Lebanon: Learning to Listen

Assad Shaftary survived six attempts on his life and wondered why. Why had he been spared when others had died? Perhaps there was a reason.

A veteran of Lebanon's long civil war, Shaftary served in the Lebanese intelligence service. At the end of the war he looked back at his own actions and those of his comrades and concluded, "We've gone too far." He judged himself, saying: "I am not a good Christian."

A coup followed the war, and Shaftary fled from the Christian area where suddenly he was considered a traitor by the very people he thought he had been fighting for. During that time he met members of Moral Rearmament, who introduced him to the idea that if he really wanted to change the world, he must start with himself. He began a process of self-examination that continued for many years.

On a personal level Shaftary dealt with the way he treated his wife and his friends. He examined how he dealt with the other during the war. He engaged in dialogue with Muslims for the first time. Most dramatically, following the internal process of change, Shaftary went public. He apologized in the press for what he had done in the war.

When he described his own process of change, Khatib confined himself to the intellect.

Now in his fifties, he has a wider and longer view of history and politics.

He judged himself, saying: "I am not a good Christian."

Now he speaks out publicly against prejudice, telling his story to audiences in schools and universities. His approach is low-key and has the quality of spiritual atonement. "I owe it to humankind in general and the Lebanese people in particular. I did so much damage, I have to do this." He works with a Muslim at both Christian and Muslim schools.

As a Christian in Lebanon, Shafatary grew up hating Muslims. The political reason was their support for a pan-Arab nation, while he was loyal to Lebanon. Shafatary's hatred for Muslims was deep. He considered them to be less than human—traitors and killers. The war's daily kill report was just a score, just numbers. "I lost all sense of humanity," he said.

Shafatary sees the new generation in Lebanon repeating the same tragic mistakes today. He hears the same expressions that he heard in his youth. "Society keeps regenerating the same hatred and prejudice," he said. When he heard his own son express such ideas, his mission of peace acquired particular urgency. He and others like him go out and tell their stories. "Many know me and know what I did during the war, what I was responsible for. Many people tell me privately that they agree but don't want to publicly say things that are bad for the image of Christians."

When Shafatary began to speak out, he was accused of having a personal political agenda. But he and others persisted in a quiet way, without seeking publicity, merely telling the truth together. They talk about how they felt about each other before the war and how they changed. "I thought I was the perfect Christian because I was killing Muslims.... Killing became automatic and systematic," Shafatary said. He speaks to Christian groups and Christian friends while Muslims try to explain to Muslim schools and Muslim friends.

Shafatary credits Moral Rearmament with having had a great influence on his spiritual change. First, by example: Members of the group engaged in their constructive work throughout Lebanon's long civil war while others were fighting and killing. Perhaps most important, they taught him to listen—both to the other in dialogue and to the Other, God. "I knew how to pray, but they taught me to listen," he says. The discipline of taking daily quiet time gave him the opportunity to analyze his life in moral terms and listen to what God's plan for him might be. For Shafatary, it felt like a gradual cleansing process: "I had a black soul that slowly became whiter, shades of grey."

Shafatary's transformation includes many of the elements that recur in the stories of deep change. Trauma and closeness to death made him question his life and seek purpose and meaning. His flight from home was important as well. In various religious traditions and mythologies, spiritual and religious heroes frequently need to leave home and their country to grow. Being away exposes the individual to new realities or old realities seen from a new perspective, without the protection of the familiar and the lulling embrace of home. Fleeing danger, the refugee becomes open and vulnerable in a way he had not been before, when he was secure in his native location. Perhaps escape from danger and the humbling status of an alien make one more aware and sensitive. As Shafatary put it, "If I had stayed in place, maybe I wouldn't have heard God's voice telling me to change."

He and others persisted in a quiet way, without seeking publicity, merely telling the truth together.

Perhaps escape from danger and the humbling status of an alien make one more aware and sensitive.

Yossi Klein Halevi, Israel: A Religious Extremist's Adolescence Outgrown

Halevi's book titles can serve as shorthand for his life changes: *Memoirs of a Jewish Extremist* was published in 1995, and in 2001 he wrote *At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden: A Jew's Search for Hope with Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land*.

An insightful, introspective writer, Halevi describes many of the characteristics of other interviewees in his own brief career as an extremist. Like many militants, he was attracted to extremism because of his father's history of victimization and courage. When the Nazis invaded Transylvania and sent Jews to concentration camps in cattle cars, Yossi's father hid in a hole in the forest with two other men. They hid in the forest until the war's end.

Young Halevi took several messages from his father's experience: First, Jews must always be vigilant and expect the worst. Hungarian Jews did not believe reports about Nazi death camps and the destruction of Polish Jewry. They felt secure. They were wrong.

One must see the world as it is, without illusion. Second, think for yourself; don't be swayed by what people say. People said attempting escape would make things worse. They and the naïve Jewish leadership were wrong.

Halevi internalized the rage his father felt, and as an adolescent sought Jewish groups in which he could express his solidarity with his people against those who did or would (because both so easily become conflated) do them harm. He joined a right-wing, militant group. Reflecting on that group's culture, he says, "We neutralized our moral dilemmas with euphemism. Murder was called 'resistance.'"

Halevi met several people he respected and liked, idealists he could relate to. One was the organizer of a peaceful movement to help liberate Jews from the Soviet Union, a visionary leader, Yaakov Birnbaum, "who, like Moses, had a speech impediment." The fact that he was religious but not a quietist attracted Halevi. Birnbaum believed in the messianic ideal of universal respect for human and civil rights. Theirs was a campaign of peaceful protest and education.

But others were active in the Soviet Jewry campaign at the time, and that was how Halevi became involved with the Jewish Defense League (JDL). The magnetism of charismatic leaders comes from the deep resonance between the narcissistic needs of leaders and followers. Halevi described one particular leader as "an egoist who was willing to take personal risks, endanger his precious self; and that paradox was the source of his charisma.... Beneath his seeming equilibrium lay rage, some hidden wound to his sense of preeminence—a wound he might someday avenge."

To someone burdened with rage, whether his own or his parents', this kind of leadership and group identity were deeply satisfying. For Halevi as for others, extremism meant passion, life.

Demonization and all-or-nothing thinking are the basic stock-in-trade of religious fundamentalists and other extremists. As Halevi puts it in *Memoirs of a Jewish Extremist*, "I believed we inhabited a world of total barbarism without relief. Civilization itself was poisoned."

Halevi emerged from his brief, adolescent flirtation with extremism gradually. He began to recognize the flaws in those he idealized. The leader of JDL acted as a liberator of Jews in the Soviet Union but as a thug toward Arabs in Israel. His own psychological development began to compete with the group ethos. He felt inauthentic, uncomfortable, and imitative. He was undermined by self-doubt and the sense that his political self was taking the place of a real self. With the wisdom of hindsight he writes, "I had tried to be selfless, but that requires a developed self to surrender. Otherwise, altruism becomes an alibi for an unformed personality. I sensed I'd reached the point where idealists go wrong, begin to turn into politicians. A young person is energized by self-righteousness, but an adult trying to remake the world without confronting his own flaws risks hypocrisy and worse."

He continues, "I wanted to define myself not by what I did but by who I was, to be as vital privately as publicly. I wanted to be so much an individualist that I wouldn't care whether others perceived me that way or not."

For Halevi, extremism was just an adolescent stop on his way to maturity. Fortunately he did not commit any acts that derailed his future during this time, and he had positive options to integrate his emotional, religious, historical, and nationalistic impulses. Journalism became his vehicle for remaining vigilant and responsive to danger while maintaining balance. In Halevi's view, a good journalist resists all-or-nothing thinking; he is capable of empathizing with all sides.

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Themes and Observations

Like the resilient people who flourish despite adverse circumstances or people who survive an illness to which most people succumb, the individuals featured in this report are extraordinary. Despite their individual uniqueness, however, some of their stories exhibit common elements. Further investigation will be needed before firm conclusions can be drawn. But this initial look at people who emerged from religious extremism and violence

suggests a number of trends and themes that call for further study. Among these themes, based upon but not limited to the interviews, three stand out: Change is a spiritual transformation; the experience of trauma is powerful; personality matters.

The change from religious extremist to proponent of peace can be a spiritual transformation, much akin to religious conversion. Anecdotes and writings about the experience of religious conversion generally take two forms. One is a gradual, tentative process, the other a sudden, dramatic sense of deliverance or discovery. The classic and unsurpassed description of the latter is found in William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

There are many anecdotal accounts of religious conversion, but the one systematic study with a control group examined forty converts aged twenty to forty.¹ It found religious conversion to be less of an ideological change and more like falling in love. The typical convert changed in the context of interpersonal relationships. Religious conversion was an emotional, not an intellectual, change. Of critical importance was the convert's history of emotional upheaval, which conversion promised to relieve.

The converts studied reported a great deal of emotional distress in the two years preceding their conversion—despair and rage, estrangement from others, and doubts about their own self-worth. In their emotional turmoil and afterward, the converts were preoccupied with the self, not with ideas. The new religion (regardless of what it was) provided them with confirmation of the self through the promise of everlasting acceptance. Sometimes the process seemed to be infatuation with a powerful authority figure, often with a peer group that lavished them with “love” and acceptance. What persuaded the converts was the prospect and promise of emotional relief. Thus it was not primarily beliefs but experiences that mattered.

Our interviewees also described a period of emotional turmoil and trauma preceding their early ventures into peacemaking. They spoke of a sense of relief and self-acceptance, peace of mind, or spiritual comfort (such as cleansing of the soul) after renouncing their former violence and committing themselves to, and working for, peace. They were happier with themselves and their new relationships, as well as their new insight into their religious obligations. Their lives became larger and more meaningful.

But the former religious extremists who became proponents of peace differ from the converts in two important ways: No looming authority figure played a strong role in the extremists' spiritual transformation. Rather than finding acceptance from a peer group, the new proponents of peace tended to lose old friends and relationships. They all experienced loneliness until they eventually created a new and different social network.

Most significant is the observation that 25 percent of converts in the study reported having experienced trauma, such as rape, a car accident, or illness, in the two years preceding their conversion. A recent trauma—grave injury, death of significant figures, or imprisonment—is characteristic of our interviewees as well.

The experience of trauma appears to be important in the process of change. In these narratives major trauma triggered, set the stage for, caused, or enabled the individual to undergo a profound transformation from militant extremist to proponent of peace.

Trauma is powerful. By definition it overwhelms the capacity of an individual by threatening with death him or her or those he or she cares for. Traumatic events, whether human or natural, challenge the coherence of the individual's worldview. Thus traumatic events shatter the world. One thinks, *this can't be happening!* Traumatic events are characteristically sudden, unexpected, and uncontrollable. All kinds of traumatic events—from private events such as a serious illness, an accident, or being the victim of a crime to mass events such as natural disasters or war—can sometimes have lifelong effects.

Recent research in the field of trauma studies has shown that some people experience post-traumatic growth. Not only do they escape disabling post-traumatic stress syndrome, but they experience positive growth following such events. This kind of growth does not happen right away; it was revealed only in long-term studies, such as those that followed people who experienced the common trauma of cancer diagnosis. For example, among one group that underwent the long, difficult, and painful bone-marrow transplant treatment,

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change are also opportunities.***

90 percent of patients reported increased spirituality, change in life philosophy, new life directions, and improved interpersonal relationships.² Many of the people who shared their stories of transformation with us came through the crucible of great loss. They saw and in some cases caused death in violent conflict or were injured or imprisoned. Most of all, they were confronted with what they perceived as the failure of their values and beliefs. Like Job, our interviewees struggled to reconcile their faith in goodness, justice, mercy, and peace with a particular kind of suffering and cruelty. And like Job, these individuals emerged spiritually renewed.

The psychological literature suggests some of the factors that may make it more likely that one will have positive growth after a traumatic life event. Some of these include personal traits, such as optimism, and the coping style an individual brings to the trauma. Coping through approach strategies—by actively doing something—is more likely to produce positive growth than by using avoidance strategies, such as trying not to feel the pain or not to think.

The narratives in this report represent active struggles to move forward, to rebuild the peacemakers' selves, lives, and worlds in light of the trauma.

Times of trauma, loss, and change are also opportunities. Like our interviewees, others who have written stories of transformation, such as Nonie Darwish and Brigitte Gabriel, note the powerful effect that acts of compassion had on their own progress away from hate.³ Darwish is the daughter of an Arab *shaheed*, a “martyr” killed in the line of duty, honored for organizing the *fedayeen* (assassins), an Arab terrorist group in the 1950s in Gaza. Gabriel grew up in Lebanon. Both women came from societies drenched in anti-semitic and anti-Israel propaganda.

Each describes her amazement when, in a time of illness, injury, and need, Israeli Jews, acting in their official capacity as healthcare providers and extending themselves as human beings, treated her with compassion. Yasin Malik had the same experience with Hindu doctors. For Pastor James Wuye, the catalyst was a Muslim imam. What the stories share is the expression of compassion on one side and receptivity to it on the other, along with the courage to recognize that since the source of compassion was a member of a loathed group, they had to reconsider their loathing and the actions that grew from it. Compassion alone would not have been enough; the recipient of compassion from a hated other must be honest enough to recognize what has been given, must be gracious in accepting it, and must have the humility and courage to learn its lesson.

***The journey from violence to
peace was, for a long time, a
lonely journey.***

Our interviewees differ from generally studied trauma survivors in at least one important way: Social support is often critical in determining how well survivors of serious illness or loss will overcome the experience. For most of our interviewees, however, the journey from violence to peace was, for a long time, a lonely journey. Social connections and loyalty constituted an attraction of extremism and a source of resistance against the changes they eventually made. Nevertheless, no one made the transition entirely alone. Most of the narratives mention at least one supportive person who could be trusted. And when there was no such flesh-and-blood person, imagination supplied an inspiring historical or political figure who served as comfort, consolation, and connection to a new community.

Personality factors play a role in transformation. We have examined individuals whose lives radically changed focus, from combat to peacebuilding. Along with their activities, what has changed is their life narrative, their personal story. Some of them describe a transformation of belief, outlook, and spiritual understanding. But have their personalities changed?

Based on interviews alone it is not possible to answer this question. Behavioral scientists inform us that certain personality traits are hard-wired, stable inclinations that have been identified even in tiny babies and are cross-culturally consistent. Beyond that basic level of personality, people develop characteristic adaptations to life that integrate their culture, motivation, social roles, values, and coping methods. Some of these adaptations may change throughout life.

Finally, each of us creates a life narrative that integrates our experiences in a meaningful way. It is our evolving life story, which continually integrates and reconstructs the past and projects into the future. The life narrative provides identity, a sense of personal continuity, and meaning. It draws upon cultural and religious models, and it can change over time.

Thus, although we are inclined to respond to the world in broadly characteristic ways, our culture and individual experience refine those inclinations. As we grow through life, we participate in our personality development by constructing an integrative life narrative.

Jerrold Post and other writers have described some psychological characteristics of extremists and terrorists.⁴ Although our subjects had been extremists, they did not share these characteristics.

In their careers as militants and extremists, none described having been emotionally bound to a particular extremist leader. Devoted followers of charismatic leaders are often narcissistic personalities, individuals who seek emotional gratification and confirmation of themselves by identifying with ideal authority figures. The charismatic leader provides the personal affirmation these personalities need, as does the overwhelming identification with the idealized group and a projection of evil and weakness onto the enemy.

Although they reported having shared the prejudice and black-and-white assumptions of their group about the other, they had acquired their extremism “naturally,” via family, history, culture, and society, rather than seeking it as a means of healing an injured self.

Even without a charismatic leader-follower relationship, some personalities incline toward extremism.

Following World War II a great deal of social science and psychiatric research explored the authoritarian personality and its particularly high level of ethnocentrism. This authoritarian type was characterized by an internal conflict between respect for authority and desire for independence. Unconsciously rejecting weakness and dependency (except in circumstances clearly beyond one’s control, such as an illness), this personality identified with authority and disdained those considered weak or members of the social out-group. This personality was rigid, emotionally repressed, and conventional in self-presentation.

Authoritarian personalities are not open to experience, nor do they really like anyone. When their hostility is diverted from one group, it will probably be directed to another. They are emotionally cold, and their personal relationships tend to be power-oriented or exploitative. The authoritarian personality provides fertile ground for prejudice.

Since they fear their own weakness, authoritarian personalities are unlikely to be moved by appeals to their sympathy. Appeals to reason are also unlikely to be persuasive. Rather, the authoritarian personality can be swayed by appeals to conventionality or submission to authority.

In some ways, the description of the authoritarian personality suits some of the followers of militant extremism. But it does not fit our interviewees. Perhaps they had never been typical religious extremists; or perhaps there are many types.

Whether they were naturally inclined to be open to experience or were broken open by the force of their traumas and losses we cannot know, since we met them after the fact. Reason played a role in all their transformations. So did the inspiration of important relationships or role models. It seems unlikely that they were authoritarian personalities to begin with, unlike some of their former colleagues who are extremists.

For the interviewees, change happened by degrees, and even when the new, more peaceful outlook was consolidated, it was nuanced and fluid. Acceptance of the once-hated “other” is part of a process that takes place over time.

One of the key psychological characteristics of extremism is black-and-white thinking: ascribing goodness to one’s own group and projecting evil onto the other. The culture of extremism contains language, stories, and reasoning that contribute to the demonization of the other. This “us and them” mentality has been documented in a great range

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The description of the authoritarian personality does not fit our interviewees.

Recognizing the shared humanity of the enemy was a necessary, but often very difficult, step.

Peace and peacemaking is not an all-or-nothing posture; it is partial and particular.

of extremist cultures, including those that have led to genocide. (See, for example, Ervin Staub's seminal studies.)⁵

In religious extremism, the projection of evil onto the other is expressed in transcendent terms that imbue hate with cosmic significance. Images of God and the devil, for example, are handy and serviceable. This splitting of the world into good and evil is one of the most fundamental assumptions that our interviewees challenged in their journey to peacemaking. Recognizing the shared humanity of the enemy was a necessary, but often very difficult, step.

It was a step that had to be taken and retaken, over and over again. Change is partial and happens by degrees. It frequently appears to be one step forward, two steps back—particularly in relating to the other.

One interviewee shared a long and heartfelt description of becoming more aware of the emotional dynamics underlying acts of mutual cruelty between religious groups in the Middle East. He had slowly and painstakingly become sensitive to the way people who have suffered oppression, loss, and humiliation in war become aggressive. He recognized that process in himself and his Christian colleagues as well as in his former enemies, Muslims.

About Israelis he confessed, "I don't understand how people who suffered so much can make others suffer." He denied feeling any hostility to them and quickly added that there are both good and bad Israelis. But he was unable to understand a phenomenon in one group that he was quite able to understand in another. This difference reflects the intimate relationship between emotion and reason. What he probably meant was that one group was still more alien, more foreign, to him. He found it more difficult to empathize with their psychological and political reality than with others'.

An early step in the journey away from extremism is the recognition of nuance in the other. Similarly, peaceseekers need to be understood as nuanced. Peace and peacemaking is not an all-or-nothing posture; it is partial and particular. It grows and changes.

Recommendations

- Further and more systematic study of people who have left extremism behind is urgently needed. The emergence of common themes in this preliminary work calls for further examination, to understand and promote the exit from extremist groups.
- Nearly all who have told the story of their transformation begin with their former immersion in a culture of hate. Hate literature and speech or media of all kinds need to be vigorously challenged, to facilitate independent thinking.
- Religious leaders should promote more concrete, specific, and detailed religious language and imagery for peace. Visual imagery and metaphor should engage the imagination with the richness and satisfactions of peace. We have an elaborate language of violence that is visual, visceral, and imaginative. In contrast, the language of peace tends to be simplistic, bland, and uninspiring.
- We should publicize mythic stories of nonviolence and positive, constructive heroes with whom people can identify. When individuals search for who they really are, it helps to have mythical as well as vigorous contemporary role models.
- Each faith group should talk about the other in its own language to its own people, encouraging complex thinking instead of all-or-nothing, black-and-white concepts. A more nuanced view of one's own group as well as of the other includes consideration of the challenging empathic question, how do others see themselves?
- Trauma, such as illness, injury, loss, or relocation, can facilitate positive encounters with the other and with individuals who represent and promote alternatives to violence. Trauma offers an opportunity for spiritual growth as well as new, significant

relationships. We should take the opportunity to reach out to people struggling to cope with change.

- Relationships are key. Extremists risk losing a great deal of social, emotional, and interpersonal support when they convert to a more peaceful outlook. They often risk physical harm and other loss as well. For those who have made the transformation, a supportive community is essential. Organizations and individuals who encounter them should provide support and even protection as they make the transition.

Notes

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5. Ervin Staub, *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

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